

# THE TALE OF TEA

*Tea awakens the mind and arouses the senses, but calms the heart.  
Ancient Chinese wisdom tells us so. But what else do the history books reveal?*

BY GEORGE VAN DRIEM / PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUKE DUGGLEBY



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Picking tea leaves in the early morning at Jingmai village in Yunnan province.



Soon after the Portuguese made landfall in Japan in 1542, the first accounts were sent back to Europe, saying that people in the Far East drank hot water. These early reports created a stir in Europe, where hot beverages such as tea, coffee and cocoa were still quite unknown. The Western amazement about the drinking of hot water became the very first topic of conversation when the first Japanese embassy in the West opened in Europe on November 14th, 1584.

At the time, Phillip II was the king of both Portugal and Spain. After months at sea, four emissaries from Japan travelled overland to the royal residence northwest of Madrid. The Japanese diplomats entered the

Escorial bearing various gifts, and the first item they presented to the king was a porcelain *sake* cup.

The Jesuit priest escorting the Japanese emissaries explained to Phillip II that the cup was used for drinking rice wine. To this the king replied, "How is that? Do they not drink hot water?" The escort explained to the king, "Yes, but the Japanese also make wine". Then the king inquired, "Do the Japanese drink hot water only in wintertime?" To this the priest replied that they always drank hot water. This confirmation of the many Portuguese reports about the drinking of hot water in the Far East amazed the Iberian king.

The eye-witness account continues: "And it is not

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without reason that the king was surprised, for verily the Japanese drink hot water both in the summer and in the winter, and in the winter they sometimes drink it chilled with snow."

All the parochial European astonishment about hot water somehow came to overshadow the news about tea itself. The Portuguese Jesuits did send reports home about tea and its properties, but it took quite some time for the Occidental audience to take notice.

The very first mention of tea did not reach Europe by way of the high seas, but via the Silk Road. A Venetian text published in 1559 records the account of a Persian merchant named Chaggi Memet, who spoke of a plant which he called "the *chai* of Cathay". He reported that this plant was exceedingly popular in China:

"They boil this herb, dried or fresh, in water. Taking one or two cups of this decoction on an empty stomach alleviates fever, headache, stomach ache,

pain in the sides or joints, whilst drinking it as hot as you can bear it. He said that, moreover, this stuff was good for countless other ailments, most of which he could not even remember, though gout was one of them. If the stomach feels bloated and heavy from having over-eaten, then drinking just a bit of this decoction will help digest the food in a short time. It is so dear and highly valued that nobody travels without it."

The word sent by Jesuits from Japan had an even greater impact, and the first tea leaves themselves came to Europe not by way of the Silk Road, but directly from the Far East. The Portuguese word for tea, *cha*, is taken directly from the Japanese word. Writing on October 14th, 1564 from what today is Oita prefecture in northeastern Kyushu, the Portuguese Jesuit Luís d'Almeida became the first European to describe powdered green tea or *matcha*:

"It is the custom amongst the noble and wealthy Japanese, when they receive a visitor of any consequence, that upon his parting they will show him their most precious pieces of ceramics as a final show of affection: these being all vessels with which they drink a certain finely ground herb, which they have the custom of drinking and which is delicious and which is called *chà*. The way to drink it to place half a nutshell of the powder of this finely ground herb in a porcelain cup and then mix it up with the very hot water and then drink it."

It would take nearly half a century before tea would first be brought to Europe. In 1610, small quantities of tea leaves as well as Japanese green powder tea in earthenware jars were brought to Holland via Batavia, as Jakarta was then called, by the Dutch East India Company.



A tea picker in Yunnan.



Paingun ethnic minority tea pickers in Myanmar leave their village for the steep slopes to pick tea.





Tamil tea pickers in Haputale, Sri Lanka return from a morning of picking tea leaves and have them weighed and collected by an estate employee.





Once a year local Palaung people in Myanmar celebrate a festival at the monastery on top of Lawi Seng mountain. It is here where they worship a tea tree believed to have grown from the first ever tea seeds that were given to the local people by a Burmese king over 800 years ago.

*The Burmese practice of eating pickled tea leaves, adopted by Dutch mariners in the 17th century, dates to hoary antiquity. Tea was eaten for centuries before tea was ever imbibed as an infusion.*

In 1634, the Dutch East India Company established a presence in Burma. In 1680, the Dutch abandoned Burma, at the same time that the Dutch had just been driven from Formosa (modern Taiwan) and had begun scaling down their presence in Siam. Instead the "Lords Seventeen" or *Heren XVII*, who ran the Dutch East India Company from its Amsterdam headquarters, decided to concentrate on the more profitable trade with Japan, China, Indonesia, India and Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka).

It was during the Burmese years of the Dutch East India Company that Philippus Baldaeus reported Dutch mariners in Asia regularly eating boiled tea leaves on board their ships as a salad, dressed with

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Villagers from all over the area come to give offerings to the monks of the monastery before praying to the tea tree and the spirit of Lawi Seng.



Here the local people scramble to grab offerings given to the ancient tea tree to take home for good luck and, as women aren't allowed to enter the shrine, fight from the other side of the fence.

vinegar, oil and pepper. The Dutch seamen learnt this crude but satisfying dish in Burma, where to this day pickled tea leaves, or *lephet*, are eaten. This is but one example of how tea was eaten for centuries before ever being imbibed as an infusion.

In the verdant region of Asia that forms the native habitat of the tea tree, indigenous peoples originally chewed pickled tea leaves or used tea as a finely-chopped vegetable. Only later did tea come to be served as a soup. Native tribes of northeastern India, upper Burma and southwestern China have long practised the custom of pickling and fermenting tea leaves inside of bamboo internodes or buried in pots or wrapped in plantain leaves in the ground and eating the tea as a condiment or just chewing the tea leaves as a quid.

In Burma, the original way of consuming tea still remains the most widespread.

Pickled tea plays a pivotal role in Burmese ritual culture. Litigants, having settled a civil suit in bygone days, used to sit down together and eat pickled tea leaves in a ritual known as *lephet sa*, literally "eating tea." The large wicker baskets used for carrying pickled tea leaves on one's back are known as *lephet ton*, or "lephet carrying basket." The distribution of pickled tea packets is an important custom known as *lephet htou'cha*, which is performed to invite people to a marriage or other ceremony.

The eating of pickled tea is part of mainstream Burmese culture, but the practice is also shared by many other ethnic minorities in Burma and minority nationalities in the Chinese provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan. In this part of southwestern China, the practice of drinking tea as a soup gradually evolved into drinking tea as a flavoured infusion.

The story goes that, once





Tea pouring ceremony at an old tea house on Qinghefang street in China.



upon a time, an ancient Chinese emperor named Shennong was outside boiling water under a tree. It so happened that the tree under which he sat was a tea tree. From its boughs a few leaves fell into his cauldron of boiling water. Upon imbibing, he discovered tea to be an invigorating and salubrious tonic. Like most fables, the account is imaginary. This event is supposed to have transpired sometime between 2737 and 2698 BC, during the reign of Emperor Shennong, who is also a Chinese ancestor god.

In reality, the earliest historical mention of Shennong is the *Shiji* “historical record”, compiled by the grand historian Sima Qian between 109 and 91 BC. BY this time the

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A tea factory worker stands with sacks of fermented tea inside a tea factory in Myanmar.

mythical Emperor Shennong had not been around for over two millennia. The historical reality is far more fascinating. Originally, Chinese did not even have a specific character to designate tea.

The leaves of *Camellia sinensis* were first used by other ethnolinguistic communities in the area between northeastern India, Burma and southwestern China as a condiment, chewed as a quid and taken as a medicine. When the Chinese adopted tea, the character *tu* denoted any of a number of bitter medicinal herbs, ranging from tea *Camellia sinensis* to the sow thistle *Sonchus oleraceus*. Only later did tea come to be consumed as a refreshing tonic and a medicinal elixer, usually flavoured with salt, ginger, garlic and other spices.

The idea of drinking unadulterated tea only came into vogue during the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD). The practice was first cultivated in Zen monasteries, where an infusion

of tea leaves was taken as an aid to maintain mental alertness during long meditation sessions. As an orphan, the scholar Lu Yu (733–804 AD) was first exposed to tea when he was adopted by a Zen monk of the Longgai monastery in Jingling in Hubei province. The modern ideogram for tea, *chá*, first appears in the famous Cha Jing *Classic of Tea*, and Lu Yu appears to have invented the character specifically to denote tea as an infusion.

Chinese tea culture as well as the fine implements, porcelains and lovely celadon vessels used to prepare and serve tea attain an unparalleled degree of sophistication during the Song dynasty (960–1279 AD). It is during this period that powdered green tea was first developed and that tea was introduced to Japan. Once tea arrived in the Japanese archipelago, tea culture underwent its own evolution as practices were adapted to native sensibilities. Whilst retaining

many traditions of the ancient Chinese art of tea, Japanese tea culture attained new heights of refinement and elegance.

Centuries later, caffeine was first isolated from coffee in 1821, and theine was extracted from tea in 1827. By 1838 it had become firmly established that both caffeine and theine were one and the same natural substance with exactly the same molecular formula. In modern times, researchers around the world, especially in Japan, have discovered the beneficial properties of the antioxidants contained in tea. These substances act as the scavengers of free radicals in our bodies, and so retard the process of aging.

The bioflavonoids, catechins, theaflavins and thearubigins in tea have been found to inhibit many forms of cancer, reduce cholesterol and prevent hardening of the arteries. These natural phytochemicals exhibit a spectrum of beneficial physiological properties which cutting-edge research is currently enabling us to understand. We may now infer that Zen monks used tea as a meditation aid not just because of the caffeine that it contained.

The benefits of drinking tea differ from one type of tea to another. Green tea is claimed to be the most healthy, but black tea has its own health benefits. Green teas and lightly fermented oolongs contain a range of catechins, amongst which epigallocatechin gallate is the most famous. Black teas on the other hand contain compounds called theaflavins.

The health benefits of green tea and black tea differ, and today the newest findings of biomedical research on the natural compounds in tea show that fresh unprocessed tea leaves have a whole other set of distinct

health benefits. In other words, eating tea leaves, as the Burmese still do and as their ancestors did in ancient times, may be quite good for you.

In 1742, Vincent la Chapelle invented a recipe for a *crème au thé* in the second edition of his five-volume cookbook *Cuisinier moderne*. In 1860, the Parisian tea merchant Henri Mariage invented a tea-flavoured chocolate, which he christened *chocolat des mandarins*. In 1986, Richard Bueno and Kitti Cha Sangmanee opened a Parisian tea salon offering an array of dishes of the new *cuisine au thé*.

The macrobiotic chef Patricio Garcia de Paredes, based at the Kushi Institute in Japan, has developed numerous tea recipes, popularised in Switzerland by Peter Oppliger. Sri Lanka enjoys an abundance of fresh succulent tea leaves. Most are turned into fully shredded, completely oxidised black tea. However, modern Ceylonese tea cuisine incorporates freshly picked tea leaves in magnificent new dishes. It is time once again to eat tea.

Portuguese *chá* is taken directly from Japanese *cha*. Yet French *thé*, Swedish *te*, German *Tee*, Italian *tè*, Spanish *té*, Finnish *tee* and Sinhalese *te* all derive from the Dutch word *thee*. The first mention of tea in a Dutch source dates from 1596.

In the celebrated travelogue *Itinerario*, tea is mentioned by its Japanese name *cha*. This is hardly surprising because its author, Jan Huygen van Linschoten, had sailed on Portuguese ships to Japan for many years as a Dutch spy, many say. But, *cha* did not become the Dutch word for tea.

The Portuguese were the first Westerners to discover and describe tea, but the Dutch were the first to commercialise

the commodity in the West. Their main port of trade was the Chinese port city of Amoy, more commonly known today by its Mandarin name Xiamen. If you have never heard how the Dutch word *thee* is pronounced, just go to Amoy. Ask a true son of the soil how to say “tea” in his own native Hokkien dialect of Minnan Chinese, and you will hear him say “tea” just as it is now still pronounced in Dutch.

Whether Dutch mariners heard the Hokkien word for the first time in Amoy or in Java, where many Hokkien communities lived and thrived, remains a mystery. The Dutch word *thee* was adopted as English *tea* in the 17th century. Originally, English *tea* was

pronounced just like Dutch *thee*. In Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*, published in 1711, *tea* occurs in canto iii:

“Close by those meads, for ever crown’d with flow’rs,  
Where Thames with pride surveys his rising tow’rs...

Here thou, great Anna! whom three Realms obey,

Dost sometimes counsel take — and sometimes tea.”

Likewise, in Gray’s *Trivia*, published in 1720, the word *tea* is used to rhyme with *py*. By 1750, the pronunciation of English *tea* had changed to rhyme with *sea*.

The author and photographer will release a comprehensive book on the history of tea in spring 2015. ✱



Pu'er tea, a variety of fermented dark tea produced in Yunnan, is broken off the brick and brewed by adding hot water.